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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S ISSUES IN IRAN

¶1. SUMMARY. Interviews with several Iranian women active on women's issues from across the political spectrum offered a mixed perspective on the status of women in Iran. Both conservative leaders of women's NGOs and other working women discussed the need for greater independence for Iranian women. The assumptions underlying what independence means and how to achieve it, however, varied greatly. Conservatives focused primarily on providing women with greater access to education or strengthening their role in the family, while more liberal women were more interested in using their education in the workplace. NGOs interested in advancing women's rights have found a niche in Iran, working primarily to equalize access to education and health care for rural women, but face skepticism from urban, educated women due to the limited scope of their actions. END SUMMARY.

NGO LEADERS - LITTLE DISSENT FROM STATUS QUO

¶2. In February, Conoff interviewed several Iranian women representing NGOs seeking to attend the 49th Meeting of the UN Commission on Women taking place in New York February 28 - March 11, 2005. Based on these interviews, the women's NGO sector in Iran appears quite active, although narrowly focused. The NGOs primarily conduct research or offer small-scale classes in basic education, child care, and health care. Few provide social services directly, or financial support to women. While the NGO leaders are dependent to some extent on the government - the GOI organized participation in the conference and informed NGO representatives when they could apply for a visa - the small NGOs stated that they received little support or information from the government. For example, most asked Conoff who else (from the Iranian government and the NGO community) was attending the conference. They all conduct much of their work over the Internet, and are very interested in interacting with women outside Iran (although primarily with other Muslim women).

¶3. When asked about the difficulties facing women in Iran today, the NGO leaders spoke with a common voice in praise of the Islamic republic for increasing women's representation within the political system and access to education for women. They measured the success of the revolution and Islamic Republic through the increased representation of women in scientific and medical fields in universities and the addition of a women's bureau to the Ministry of Interior.

¶4. On the conservative end of the spectrum were two women representing small NGOs, one a teacher of religion and law in Qom, the other an Arabic teacher from Tehran. They described their main goal (working through their NGOs) as making women truly independent. Although the first form of independence they mentioned centered on social issues such as improved access to health care, education, and work opportunities, they were more focused on individual independence achieved through wearing the hijab. They stated that women gained respect and security by wearing the hijab, thereby allowing them to move freely throughout society.

¶5. The Managing Director of the Institute for Women's Studies and Research described her NGO as the oldest in Iran, conducting research over the past fifteen years. It holds classes on a variety of issues from HIV/AIDS to violence against women, and developed a women's studies curriculum for Iranian universities. She noted that the NGO sector in Iran began to thrive after Khatemi, but spoke mostly in generalities about how a society cannot survive if it does not take advantage of the resources of half the population (i.e. women).

¶6. Although this Institute publishes Zan-e Farzaneh, the first women's studies journal in Iran, she did not mention that its editor Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh had been arrested in November 2004 when asked about any troubles her NGO faced. She did note that the problem facing women today is what to do after they've received their education - employment options are lacking due to a poor economy and traditional attitudes about who should receive scarce jobs. Her husband would not allow her to travel alone to the United States - he applied for a visa to accompany her.

¶7. A woman working as an expert in the education and training division of the women's rights section of the Ministry of Interior claimed the status of women improved substantially after the revolution because it created common standards among the different provinces of Iran. She praised what she described as an affirmative action system to promote women into management positions within the government. She was hopeful that some day a

woman would be able to run for president, but did not believe it would happen soon. Unique among her colleagues, she was interested in learning more about women's rights in the United States. She was supportive, but skeptical of the women's NGO community, stating that there were only a few effective Iranian NGOs. She cited presidential advisor Maryam Shojaei's Center for Women's Participation as leading among them, but stated that some NGOs that provided rural education were also useful.

¶18. The head of one such rural education NGO stated that the biggest problem she faces is improper education. Her NGO provides primary education to children, health and parenting education to mothers, and in-kind aid to poor women in Hamedan and the surrounding villages. She stated that she did not have any problems operating her NGO, but complained that she received no government support. She stated that the government subsidy to poor women is paltry, and requests by her NGO for other aid such as meeting space received no response.

WORKING WOMEN SEEK INDEPENDENCE

¶19. Other Iranian women interviewed in a similar time frame expressed similar overall goals to the NGO leaders, but less satisfaction with the status quo. A 24-year-old artist from Tehran stated that the most significant problem facing Iranian women was freedom of thought, but also freedom of daily life. She stated that more women are studying in university and marrying later not because of cultural change, but because so many men had died during the Iran-Iraq war or had emigrated. Coming from a wealthy family, she is able to pursue her career as an artist (her parents created a studio for her and sponsored private exhibitions - since she paints figurative representations of women she cannot exhibit in public), but most women can only stay at home after finishing university. She was familiar with several women's NGOs working in Iran, but stated that since they offer little direct support, they had little effect.

¶10. A 44-year-old chemical engineer working for the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) was very frustrated about the employment options for women. She stated that it is rare now for women to find jobs working for NIOC, and no high positions are available to women. She noted that the fact that many men had been promoted above her at work was a common problem - since so few jobs are available, they tend to go to heads of households, and men still have more of the informal connections that lead to promotion.

¶11. A 27-year-old "cultural expert" working for the Culture and Tourism ministry identified most strongly with the reformists. She stated that the situation of women depended primarily on their family. She said freedom for women improved dramatically under Khatemi, but she seemed doubtful about continued change. She said someone would need to rein in the conservatives in parliament, and was interested in hearing what precisely the US would do to support the reformers.

¶12. Although none of these women wore the hejab, none mentioned it as a problem. The artist said that the hejab now is very relaxed, but that she avoids wearing it by spending most of her time indoors.

COMMENT

¶13. Although these women came from different political perspectives, all - conservative and liberal - identified similar problems facing Iranian women. Each stated that the primary problem facing women in Iran was freedom of thought. Some identified this with a lack of education; others stated more explicitly that women were not thinking of themselves as equals to men, and were denying themselves opportunities. Freedom within the family, economic opportunity and violence against women were also mentioned as problems, but all were secondary to the opinion that women in Iran still need to think of themselves as independent.

¶14. Behind this uniformity of purpose lie different assumptions and ultimate goals. Even conservatives tout the rhetoric of women's liberation, but face skepticism from young professionals. On the other hand, the social reforms (such as the relaxed hejab) established under Khatemi do seem to have met the minimum present requirements of politically active women living in Iran. If the goal of women's rights activists in Iran is greater freedom of thought, the classes provided by NGOs are a step in the right direction. But until these NGOs begin to address the concerns of their natural constituency - Iran's urban elite women - their effectiveness will remain limited.